

Prostitution in Malawi and the HIV/AIDS Risk

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ABSTRACT

Prostitution is not always easy to define, especially on a cross-cultural basis. In the African context, there can be a continuum between offering gifts for sexual services and more commercially-oriented sex work. It can form an element of a cash nexus between men and women, in a situation where those absorbed into wage labour have been overwhelmingly male. A study of gossip and off-the cuff remarks concerning prostitution in the Zomba district, Malawi, is reported. A link between geographical movement by wealthier males and casual sexual activity is observed, with payment a form of distribution of largesse. Commercial prostitutes ('bar girls') were seen also to recognise the risk, but were found to feel there was no alternative, that they had AIDS anyway, or that mortality was decided simply by fate. Some clients used condoms but others refused, and even some prostitutes would not use them. Explanation of prostitutes' behaviour can be seen as mainly economic, but considerable male patronage despite known risks needs also to be recognised.

INTRODUCTION

Prostitution is clearly recognisable as a high-risk occupation. There are risks of violence, arrest, and conventional sexually transmitted diseases. The spread of AIDS, however, has added a new dimension to the situation, as an incurable, fatal disease spread by the very activity in which prostitutes specialise. This is especially problematic in a country such as Malawi, where AIDS is mainly heterosexually transmitted and by 1991 had become the leading cause of adult death. The present paper is concerned to identify the phenomenon of 'prostitution' in the broader context of exchange of cash for sex, and to examine its prevalence in Malawi with reference to a case study in one area (Zomba District). Particular attention will be paid to the HIV/ AIDS risk and how prostitutes react to it. Empirical data will be presented, showing how far they recognise it as a problem and how they articulate their concerns. There will also be some discussion of how far prostitutes are stigmatised in the wider community as being a source of AIDS.

1. DEFINITIONAL PROBLEMS

Prostitution, which is also described as 'sex work' is not an easy phenomenon to identify or to define. Some form of exchange of sexual services for money is implied; this can be a purely episodic transaction, but much more can also be involved. Some women make their living solely by commercial sex, while others may use sex work as only one possible source of income. Some women who exchange sex for money are selective about their partners. There are some who provide services additional to sex, while others will have regular rather than casual customers. Payment can sometimes be in kind, or in terms of subsequent favours (such as professional advancement), rather than directly in cash. Others such as Engels (1972) have seen marriage and prostitution as forming parts of a single continuum (cf. also Bujra 1975: 214).

If even within the framework of Western culture the notion of prostitution is difficult to define precisely, the problem becomes even greater when a cross-cultural perspective is adopted (cf. Standing 1992: 477). Day (1988) has noted major differences between Europe, Asia and Africa in the way in which prostitutes operate. When examining the African situation, there can be dangers of importing assumptions derived from Western society. It has for instance been suggested by Caldwell et al. (1989) that in many cases the exchange of sexual favours for money is not stigmatised in the same way as in Western societies. This, moreover, is in a context where it has overwhelmingly been males who have been absorbed into wage-earning: and a cash-nexus between males and females has correspondingly assumed considerable social significance (Standing 1992: 477). Larson (1989) has also noted this, while recognising that there are major differences in patterns of prostitution within Africa. A further problem-area can be the tendency, widespread in Western-oriented sociology, to look at prostitution in terms of deviant behaviour. Prostitution can be quite a common occupation for urban women in some situations, especially where single men have migrated for work on a temporary or permanent basis (cf. Dirasse 1991: 1-2; Wallman 1996: 13); and in many parts of Africa, labour migration has been a characteristic feature of the process of urbanisation. Colonial authorities sometimes attempted to discourage prostitution, but enforcement was often half-hearted, since it was also seen as a way of sustaining the system of migrant labour by servicing an urban work force. In some urban situations, there could be a whole continuum from relatively stable marriage, through temporary urban marriage, to casual sexual encounters in exchange for cash (cf. Iliffe 1987: 183; Day 1988: 424; Dirasse 1991: 4-6; Papart 1988: 118-9; Pickering et al. 1992: 80; Pons 1969: 172, 213-53). In some cases, too, there could be certain domestic services provided in addition to sex. A further factor can be seen as the tendency for sex work to be stratified, ranging from a discreet and exclusive courtesan ship , to commercial prostitution (cf. Iliffe 1987: 17, 84; Dirasse 1991: 45; White 1990: 10-21; Ogden 1996: 172-3. Day (1988: 424), and

Pickering et al. (1992: 80), also observe that a prostitute normally remains part of her community and does other jobs. Robertson (1984: 45-6) comments that difficulties in obtaining employment can lead women to seek self-employment in the informal sector; and that, within this, prostitution can be a relatively lucrative option. Some women may use prostitution as a way of accumulating capital for commercial enterprise of a different kind (Bujra 1975: 213); while for other women, prostitution can be the only means of survival. Corresponding to the discussion as to the 'deviant' status of prostitution, there has also been discussion as to whether it can be seen as exploitative (e.g. Bujra 1975: 215; Overall 1992). The presence of AIDS does, however, add a new dimension to the situation.

The activities of prostitutes have been found to be of particular importance with respect to the spread of the HIV virus. While it must be acknowledged that there are dangers in suggesting that only prostitutes are to be seen as a high-risk group (Day 1988: 425) it has also been observed that 'core groups' *do* have a particularly important role in HIV transmission, and that adoption of safer practices by prostitutes can have a serious impact on risk reduction (Bloor 1995: 15, 24-6; Duncan et al. 1994: 331).

Typically, a more commercially-oriented form of prostitution has tended in Africa to be associated with outlets for alcoholic drink. The focus of interest here will be upon women who are so engaged, and who ply for their trade in bars. This discussion must also take into account the customers of 'bar girls'. These tend to be geographically mobile as well as moving between partners; in Malawi, their activity is known as *kupondaponda* in Chichewa, or as *movious* when speaking English. The latter expression has also been reported from Zambia (Schuster 1979: 79, 184). Customers for bar girls are more plentiful at the end of the month, when most wage or salary earners are paid. Surplus income is then available for male pleasure in the form of sex and drink, which are sought at the bar. It is quite common for the establishments patronised to be away from urban centres, or on the urban periphery; and some are difficult of access except by private motor transport (Schuster 1979: 88; Dirasse 1991: 36).

2. PROSTITUTION/SEX WORK IN MALAWI

It is generally the case that in Malawi, the practice of exchange of sex for money is widespread and not seen as highly problematic. It is suggested that such exchange has become so common that it is seen as legitimate. In the part of the country under consideration, there is a long history of trading activity, which predates the arrival of the British (Alpers 1979; Mitchell 1956: 17-45). The colonialists introduced coinage in 1893, and it was observed that the Yao (one of the two main ethnic groups under consideration, the other being the Chewa) adapted to the use of money very quickly and enthusiastically (Mitchell 1956: 19-20). The colonial

encounter soon led to further growth of a money economy. This followed the typical pattern of being primarily based upon migrant labour, and most men found it essential to participate after the system of poll tax had been imposed. Whereas previously they hunted for game, men increasingly sought employment and brought home money. In Chewa boys' initiations, male sexuality and hunting are presented as enactments of one another, with boys as the predators and girls as the prey. In the corresponding girls' initiations, money is used as a symbol of male essence (Kaspin 1990: 185-7, 195-6, 273). Women, however, were left out of the wage economy, apart from some very limited local opportunities in certain kinds of industrial work, or domestic service (and for the few who obtained sufficient schooling, some teaching, nursing and clerical tasks). Although there have been vigorous attempts by the political leaders to change the situation, girls' education has for long lagged behind that of boys, especially in the rural areas - hence making subsequent search for employment more difficult.

At the time of the research not even primary education was either compulsory or free. Sale of garden produce tended to be the main means of income generation for women, whether or not they were supported by a husband or male relative (Bettison 1958: 71; Chipande 1987: 317-9; Hirschmann and Vaughan 1983: 95-96). Such support could certainly not always be guaranteed. Husbands often went away to earn wages, and there is evidence that an unmarried daughter could not be sure of economic support from her parents (Bettison and Rigby 1961: 44-45). In any case, there might be dependence upon off-farm income since not all women were in a position to produce all the staple food they needed, certainly not all the year round. The situation seems to have deteriorated in recent times because of land shortages (Hirschmann and Vaughan 1984), and shortages and poverty of all kinds are particularly problematic in the case of female-headed households. Additionally, Kaspin (1990: 97) has shown how unmarried women are especially vulnerable to economic deprivation. Casual labour is the main form of off-farm work (Hirschmann and Vaughan 1983: 96). In such circumstances, some women inevitably succumb to the temptation to obtain money through paid sexual activity, which though compromising their reputation will almost certainly bring better financial returns (Vaughan 1987: 36).

Research in Blantyre (the main commercial centre of Malawi, 69 kilometres from Zomba), shows that female-headed households have been able to get money from brewing beer or from distilling home-made gin known as *kachasu* (Bettison and Rigby 1961: 8, 16, 27, 64, 151). It is only a short step from this for sexual favours to be exchanged for cash. This could also be done by some in desperation, in order to survive. Vaughan (1987: 161) has recorded songs of the following kind that were sung in the famine that occurred in 1949:

I must go to Limbe
And board a bus

My body will pay the fare
In Lilongwe, my body will do
In Limbe, it will do
In Blantyre, it will do
In Salisbury, it will do

Moreover, as Marwick points out, there was a regular flow of women to the Zambian Copperbelt, destination of many of the labour migrants, which led to a main road leading in that direction being nicknamed *mtengamahule* (conveyor of prostitutes); and a Native Authority Order eventually forbade unmarried women from travelling out of the country in that way. Marwick also makes the interesting observation that the Chichewa word for prostitute (*hule*) is almost certainly a borrowing from the Afrikaans word (*hoer*), since Chichewa words do not normally begin with an 'h'. This use of a non-indigenous word suggests the difficulties involved in incorporating the Western-type notion of a 'prostitute' into indigenous concepts (Marwick 1965: 48, 48n).

Another relevant factor is that in the cultural values of the peoples under consideration, sexual activity (though occurring in private) is not regarded as something shameful or to be hidden, at least when one is in the company of those who have been initiated. Rather, it is seen as a normal physiological activity, like eating, drinking, or sleeping (Rita-Ferreira 1966: 140). There is as a consequence less self-consciousness associated with even paid sexual activity.

The question could however be raised as to how far the post-independence government would be prepared to condone paid sex work. Dr Kamuzu Banda, the President of Malawi until forced to step down in 1993 (because of pressures for multi-partyism) displayed a certain puritanical image, and was known to rail against Western 'permissiveness' and about the importance of 'decency in dress' (Short 1974: 251-82). However, Banda's state was of the 'authoritarian' kind, where there were strict political controls but everyday life was not too closely regulated provided that one was not seen as challenging the regime. Institutionalised sex work was not felt to require close political scrutiny and was allowed to flourish in this context; for instance, an article in the government-backed newspaper (**Malawi News**, July 28th - August 3rd 1984) recognises their work openly and merely observes that bar girls feel guilty about how they earn their living. Prostitutes could even be made use of by the regime: they were sometimes employed by the secret police as a means of extracting political information from male clients (Van Dijk 1992: 157). A further relevant factor is that the political culture developed by Banda displayed a high level of achievement orientation. Material wealth came to be highly valued both as a source of modern status, in terms of ownership of prestigious consumer goods; and in traditional terms, as a source of support for less fortunate kin. In view of this and the overall poverty of the rural masses, a preoccupation with the search for more and more money could easily develop.

Historically, dependence on migrant labour has meant that on their return, men had relatively large lump sums which could sometimes be used for short periods of 'conspicuous consumption': and some of the cash could be spent on sex workers (Chirwa 1998: 65). Within Malawi itself, it remains standard practice for income to be paid monthly, even in the case of those on low wages. Moreover, higher earners can be tempted to spend something on themselves before demands of kin have to be met., and some of this might go on paid sex workers. In any case consumer items such as clothing and cosmetics can be bought for women encountered socially, as part of a general pattern of male distribution of largesse to women (who have much more restricted access to cash income but who still greatly value consumer items).

3. PROSTITUTES IN ZOMBA

Ethnically, the people of Zomba are overwhelmingly Chewa and Yao. The descent system is matrilineal; there is a loose marriage bond and a high divorce rate. Especially among the Yao, there are no cultural obstacles to early sexual activity, and intercourse is normally expected to follow immediately after a girl's initiation. As already noted, the Yao have a particularly long contact with the money economy.

Those who work from bars and whose income is mainly derived from commercially-oriented sexual activity are known as *bar girls* (the English term being sometimes used in the vernacular). Bar girls are generally to be found in certain establishments where alcohol is served (bars and bottle stores), and some which also have rooms for the use of travellers (rest houses). There are also some bars which specialise in commercially-produced maize beer (*Chibuku* and *Napolo*). These are known as 'taverns'. Some bars, taverns, bottle stores and rest houses are in the centre of Zomba while others, especially the rest houses, are more likely to be found on the urban periphery; and typically they are associated with considerable casual sexual activity. Rooms may sometimes be let for the hour as well as for the night. All can be described as sleazy places, with a predominantly male (generally relatively wealthy) clientele, mainly in the 30-50 age group; wives and ordinary girlfriends are not taken there, and females present tend to be associated with casual sex, even if they are not professional bar girls. Females present will often indicate their sexual availability by shaking hands with all male customers in the bar on arrival.

As much Kishindo's research on bar girls, both in relation to Malawian urban centres generally (covering Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu and Zomba) (Kishindo 1995b) and in relation to Zomba alone (Kishindo 1992; 1995a), focuses on the problem of why they continue their activities in the face of AIDS. He shows that the bar girls usually had a rural background and that they had experienced some

primary schooling which had been interrupted, mostly because of lack of fees: though early marriage or pregnancy could also be an important factor. Those with only a few years' schooling could find only the most menial employment in the towns; while a woman who married young and was subsequently divorced could become a bar girl for the sake of financial support for herself and any children born. Kishindo shows that actual earnings of a bar girl depended upon beauty, cleanliness and reputation for sexual performance; but that it was quite possible for her to earn more than the starting salary for a graduate in the civil service. Such earnings would often be used to support farming activity, kin, and housing projects in the woman's area of origin.

Kishindo noted that there were also some 'free-lance' prostitutes who visited bars but were not particularly attached to any, and who sometimes solicited in the street. He pointed out that only the latter activity was liable to be the subject of police attention; also that bar girls were expected to have monthly medical checks on the grounds that they were 'handling food' - though the law was not strictly enforced.

In the course of Kishindo's (1992) research in Zomba, 30 bar girls were interviewed. The mean age of the women was 18.5, and they had generally had some primary education. All of them had a rural background. The bar girls in question were paid 21.50 Malawi Kwacha (about ú3.50) monthly by the owner of the bar. The minimum monthly wage at the time was 52.50 Kwacha (about ú8), but there was little attempt anywhere to enforce this. Their main income, however, derived from sexual activity. For each act of intercourse they could expect to earn K10 (about ú1.50) within the municipality and K5 (about 75p) outside it., therefore overall their pay was reasonably good compared with what could be obtained by formal employment. Another advantage was that they were provided with accommodation at their place of work.

All were AIDS-aware, and though bar girls were targeted in encouraging use of condoms, only 32% of those surveyed by Kishindo had in fact used them. Customers were generally prepared to pay higher rates for sex without a condom (as much as four times the going rate sometimes being offered), and might refuse a bar girl who insisted on one. There could be competition among the women for clients, especially at the end of the month when people had just been paid. Owners of the establishments had no difficulty in recruiting new bar girls if any were to leave. The bar girls tended to see sexual activity as their sole means of survival, and fatalism concerning death was common (Kishindo 1995a: 41; 1995b: 159). Most of them did not see their occupation as being a life-long commitment. They expected to marry eventually, and some hoped during the course of their activity to meet a man with a good job, who could afford to buy smart clothes and cosmetics for them (Kishindo 1995b: 157).

4. PRESENT RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings reported here are part of a broader project concerned with gossip about AIDS in Zomba District, related to its cultural context. It has been recognised that local cultures can have important consequences for the pattern of HIV transmission (e.g. Bloor 1995: 27), and for this reason data were gathered in one particular locality. The research was conducted in 1993, with some updating to 1995¹. The scope of the study was wide-ranging, but with a focus on gossip, rumours and off-the-cuff remarks. It was hoped that the research would throw light upon why AIDS-related messages in Malawi had not necessarily led to behavioural change. Many other aspects of this problem were examined, but it is unsurprising that a considerable amount of data were collected upon the activities of bar girls. It was felt to be of particular interest to report and analyse separately the reasons that bar girls gave for continuing in what they knew to be a high-risk occupation. Such findings are presented here, and are placed within the broader context in which bar girls operate.

The limitations of questionnaires for collecting data on AIDS-related issues and sexual behaviour generally have been acknowledged, and a qualitative approach can be seen to produce more worthwhile results (cf. Pickering et al. 1992: 76-7; Taha et al. 1996). Most of the information was collected through participant observation, with the help of six male and six female research assistants, who were recruited locally. Observers made clear at the outset that their interest and intentions concerned social aspects of AIDS. They remained in the places allocated to them for an uninterrupted period of three months. Some unstructured interviews, where informants were asked to speak into portable tape-recorders, were used towards the end of the research period. The activity of field workers included (but was not confined to) noting the interactions around the kind of drinking outlets described earlier.

The context was therefore the girls' work situation. Bar girls would sit and drink with customers and try to attract attention, in the hope of further progress towards a lucrative sexual encounter. It needs to be remembered, therefore, that most of the comments were made in a situation where people were under the influence of alcohol. From time to time the topic of AIDS cropped up, and comments were collected on the reasons why the bar girls continued despite the risk. The quotations which follow are generally representative.

Many gave several reasons at once. But by far the most important reason was that of immediate need satisfaction:

¹ I am most grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council [UK] (award no. R000234848) for support for fieldwork; also for assistance to Mr Pierson Ntata, Professor Paul Kishindo, Mrs Suzie Rose Forster, and my twelve research assistants; to the Center for Social Research in Zomba, the Ministry of Health, Malawi, and the Universities of Hull and Malawi.

“I stay in the bar only for money. I would starve if I stopped promiscuous behaviour” (bar girl outside Chibuku Tavern).

“I cannot stop going to bed with men, because that is the only way I can earn my living” (bar girl in group of three).

“What shall we eat if we stop prostitution?” (girl in group of three at bottle store).

There was sometimes concern expressed that the threat of AIDS was ruining their business:

“It is worrying because most people now say that AIDS is spread by bar girls, and that it is in bars that AIDS is found. There is little money for our business nowadays, compared to previously when the subject was not on everyone’s lips. Most of the men nowadays are afraid of having sex with us.

But it is a lie that AIDS is found in bars and that we are carriers of AIDS. People are just spreading the news to spoil our business” (bar girl in group of four).

Some were unconcerned because they felt or knew they had AIDS:

“We are sure we already have AIDS, and we cannot stop going around with any man. What we want is money” (bar girl in group of two at Chibuku tavern).

“I will never stop because I know already that I have AIDS. I just want to contribute to those who want to have the disease. Men who want the disease come to me and ask for it” (bar girl at bottle store).

While another version was that AIDS came through fate, accident or mystical intervention:

First bar girl: “I cannot fear AIDS because everyone is going to die”.

Second bar girl: “Everyone is going to die. Those who fear AIDS are not God” (Two bar girls with four men outside Chibuku Tavern).

“I have no fear of AIDS. Everybody has his or her way to die” (bar girl with another outside a different Chibuku Tavern).

“There are many ways of getting AIDS, such as razor blades and toothbrushes. AIDS is like an accident, you cannot avoid it” (bar girl with two men outside bottle store).

(At Chibuku tavern)

First bar girl: “AIDS is unavoidable, something one cannot prevent. It is out of our control. Some even say it is God’s punishment for mankind”.

Second bar girl: “Some associate AIDS with witchcraft; when one is said to suffer from AIDS one is really bewitched”.

And there were some who denied that AIDS existed, at least as an incurable disease:

“I do not believe that there is AIDS. It was there some time back, and people have just changed it to be a new disease” (bar girl in group of two men, two bar girls, in bar at rest house).

“I must have contracted the virus in any case, but it could still take a long time to kill me... Hopefully a cure will be found, so that there will be nothing to worry about” (bar girl with another, talking to men at Chibuku bar).

Levine and Siegel (1992: 53, 60-61) have suggested that it can be useful to distinguish between *justification*, where the AIDS risk is doubted or seen as able to be eliminated; and *excuse*, where it is recognised but does not result in behavioural change. In most but not all cases bar girls tended to proffer excuses, since there was general recognition of the risk. However, some responses obtained were in terms of *justifications*, but of a different kind. The risk was acknowledged and not felt to be capable of being eliminated: but behavioural change was seen as pointless, because the risk was derived from forces outside their own control. Those who saw behavioural change as unnecessary because they thought or knew that they already had AIDS did not fit easily into either category.

As already noted, bar girls are targeted for condom supply. However, the research results showed little enthusiasm for their use.

Of particular interest are the results showing that bar girls expected some physical satisfaction as well as money, since some complained of lack of sensitivity:

“Using a condom is like taking a freezie [soft drink encased in plastic wrapper] with the plastic paper” (Bar girl, talking to two young men at bottle store).

“I do not care about AIDS and I cannot allow a man to use a condom. Using a condom is like doing nothing to me. It is better for them to give me AIDS than use a condom” (Bar girl in group inside bar).

“We do not feel sweet when they use condoms. Use of condoms is just wasting time” (Two bar girls, in group with four men outside bottle store).

“I do not possess one and have nothing to do with condoms” (Bar girl at bottle store to potential customer who suggests use of a condom).

The possibility has however to be recognised that the bar girls were speaking in such a way so as to advertise their availability for unprotected sex. The widespread reluctance of clients to use condoms with prostitutes has been recognised elsewhere; the prostitutes lack bargaining power, and male decision-making in the sexual sphere is important (Standing 1992: 479; Taha et al. 1996: 211; Wermuth et al. 1992: 77, 87-90). Kaspin (1990: 137) has also noted the cultural importance of exchange of body fluids for the Chewa.

Some might have been willing to use condoms but said that the problem was lack of availability:

“Condoms are not always available, but in any case there are many ways of getting AIDS” (bar girl, talking to two young men at bottle store).

“Use of condoms cannot be followed, because they are not always available” (bar girl with two others at Chibuku bar, talking with three men).

Such responses therefore correspond to a general pattern in which the risk is acknowledged but it is not felt that anything can be done about it. The money is needed, it is too late to change, AIDS is really something else, or it cannot be avoided because there are many ways of transmission. Kishindo’s findings to the effect that fatalism is common among bar girls are confirmed by the present research: though this attitude is also widespread in the wider community. His findings concerning condoms are also confirmed though a new dimension is that even bar girls sometimes say they object to them because of reduced sensitivity.

Bar girls were seen to be pro-active in their search for customers. A male research assistant who refused a sexual proposition from a bar girl in a Chibuku tavern was told by her:

“You should leave this place because you are doing nothing in connection with my business. A man fearing women should not visit drinking places.”

On Zomba market the following conversation among bar girls was recorded:

First bar girl: “Friends, there are a lot of people at the market.”

Second bar girl: “Yes, of course. It is the end of the month, and usually people have money in their pockets.”

First bar girl: “I hope we are going to do good business.”

Some travelling men who wished to eschew the attention of bar girls claimed that this could be problematic when the girls were highly pro-active:

“When I came and was given a room, a woman who works at the rest house knocked on my door. She was about to enter when I asked her what she wanted. The question she asked was only for my wife...I am not a person who just sleeps with women anyhow” (man at bus stop, in group of three).

“A woman who works in the rest house bit me in one of the rooms. The woman entered the room and asked to have sex (*chigololo*) with the men. The men refused, and tried to force her out of the room. In response to this, the woman bit my leg and left a wound” (man in rest house in Jali [a commercial centre in Zomba District, which sees bursts of activity at market time]).

5. THE AIDS RISK, BAR GIRLS, AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY

AIDS awareness in Zomba was widespread and many commented that they were fed up with the subject. There were some who heeded the warnings, and became closer to their families. On the other hand, some maintained that they did not believe the propaganda, or that behavioural change was pointless since they already had the disease: or, alternatively, that there were many ways of catching AIDS (such as germs and mosquitoes) in any case, which could not be avoided. Some bystanders could warn fellow-drinkers of the dangers, when interest in a bar girl was shown. On the other hand, conceptions of masculinity which were supportive of risk-taking could lead to a certain amount of bravado, especially under the influence of drink. Those in a celebratory mood could also look to casual sexual activity as a source of further enjoyment. Evidence collected includes a discussion between supporters of rival football teams. Supporters of the victors were shouting in a Napolo tavern, that “No man should fear AIDS tonight but should fuck any woman”. Supporters of the losing team, however, responded that they could not contaminate their blood with AIDS as a result of sex with ‘tavern women’. In another case, a young man who had won K20 (about ú3) in a card game boasted that he could now buy some condoms and that any woman would have sex with him because he had money. Since sexual behaviour takes place in private, it was

impossible to ascertain what subsequently went on in bar girls' rooms, especially with regard to condom use.

There was a widespread tendency to stigmatise bar girls as responsible for the spread of AIDS. As in many other situations, there was a belief that outsiders were responsible. Malawian soldiers deployed to guard rail communications through Mozambique were sometimes thought to have caught AIDS there. Or Zambian lorry drivers could be accused of bringing it. Such soldiers and lorry drivers were seen as giving the disease to bar girls, who then transmitted it to the wider community. More generally, travellers (especially lorry drivers, with relatively generous daily allowances² and soldiers were seen as being at considerable risk of AIDS because of their tendency to visit bar girls (who sometimes knew of their movements and were waiting for them). Male bar staff and owners of bars were felt to be at risk for similar reasons. Another case encountered was that of a skilled contractor working away from home, who reported that his client paid not only for his accommodation, food and beer, but also for the prostitutes whom he hired every night.

Some however felt that *only* or *mainly* bar girls (or similarly promiscuous women) could infect. Men would tend to say that bar girls were at fault for enticing their customers, especially if control had been lost under the influence of drink. There were some who called for laws against prostitution to be more strictly enforced. This was not however a unanimous view. There were those who maintained that bar girls could not have the disease because some remained healthy. The following comments were recorded from men in all-male groups in two different bottle stores:

“People in the villages are dying and AIDS is the prime suspect. But the strange thing is that bar girls are not dying; instead they are getting fat every day. There is a bar girl at the (X) bottle store (Y) miles along the Blantyre road - she is an example”.

“In Blantyre I know many women who started prostitution years ago, but are still looking very attractive.”

Some did however go on to say that a healthy bar girl could be a carrier: one version being that in women the virus was lost through menstruation. Others saw condoms as particularly appropriate when having sex with bar girls. Even here, some could be selective. A prospective customer of a bar girl, in a Chibuku Tavern, commented as follows:

² Empirically a link can be traced between long-distance lorry routes and the spread of AIDS; cf. Chirwa (1998: 61-3).

“I am going to use condoms so as not to get AIDS, because I have heard on the radio that the largest number of people who are suffering from AIDS and HIV are in Zomba, so I fear Zomba girls. If I were in Mulanje where I work, I would have sex without a condom, because the bar girls at Mulanje are not HIV positive”.

There were even cases of men who wished to marry bar girls, as these were felt to be virtuoso performers where sex was concerned. Many commentators did however note that this was a risky exercise and that some had died as a consequence.

Women, too, were very concerned about the activities of bar girls. Mistrust between women and men - especially husbands and wives - was widespread. A woman's chief fear was that her husband would spend his wages on beer and women rather than on his family, and that if the women in question were bar girls their husbands would pass the HIV infection on to their wives.

6. CONCLUSION

In studying the activities of bar girls the position of their male customers must not be overlooked. Such men have no economic motives and indeed have to pay for the risk that they are taking. A certain conception of masculinity may be relevant, associated both with risk-taking and with distribution of largesse; but this is beyond the scope of the present discussion. However, visits to bar girls were linked to male celebration, wealth and enjoyment. Risk could be acknowledged but forgotten in the excitement of the moment: or could even form part of such excitement. There were even cases where men wanted to take on a bar girl as a regular sexual partner by marrying her. Awareness of AIDS as a sexually-transmitted disease was, however, at least widespread enough for there to be recognition of sex workers as high-risk partners (except among those who denied that AIDS existed). Bar girls were sometimes stigmatised as the real source of risk.

The motives of the bar girls themselves were primarily economic. Alternative sources of wage employment were very few and were poorly paid. Income from sale of garden produce was likely to be limited and erratic. Husbands were not likely to be seen as trustworthy, and the marriage bond is very loose in any case. Though their status was low, bar girls did have relatively high incomes, which they were determined to maximise by attracting as many likely customers as possible: and they had dealings with higher-status men, who provided them with beer and even, perhaps, sexual satisfaction. All bar girls were aware of the dangers of AIDS, though some denied the truth of the message, but in most cases they were fatalistic and saw behaviour change as pointless³. Others saw no point in change since they

³ This attitude was widespread in the community: cf. Forster (1998: 541).

already had the disease. Those who did not know themselves to be HIV+ often realised that the risk they were taking was extremely high, but saw a relatively well-paid job leading almost certainly to an early grave as preferable to a longer life in rural poverty. As Sobo (1993: 461) has observed for a different cultural context, AIDS is only one of many risks faced daily by impoverished women.

The use of condoms in sexual encounters with bar girls could reduce the risk considerably, but the problem remains of clients' unwillingness to use them (Bloor 1995: 26; McKeganey and Barnard 1992: 406). It is clear that clients need to be targeted. They are relatively wealthy, and are more likely to have a rewarding future to look forward to than is the case with bar girls. However, conceptions of links between masculinity and risk-taking remain strong and provide a formidable obstacle.

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